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The University and the Camp

Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi

Abstract

If we take seriously the concerns and problematics of decolonizing the mind, we might begin by looking for sources of knowledge in the refugee camp. Camps have long been sites of empirical research: in their darkest form, as sites of detention and concentration, and in a putatively lighter form, as liberatory vehicles for the rescued and their saviours. What if camps did not serve empiricist ends of knowledge, but instead, theoretical ones? If so, then the humanitarian would become the student, the refugee the professor, and the architecture of the camp that of the university. This lecture imagines this architecture. This text draws from the keynote address given on January 25, 2019, at the workshop convened by Somayeh Chitchian, Maja Momic, and Shahd Wari at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious & Ethnic Diversity: “Inside-Out / Outside-In: Shifting Architectures of Refugee Inhabitation.”

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1 - This text draws from the keynote address given by the author on January 25, 2019, at the workshop convened by Somayeh Chitchian, Maja Momic, and Shahd Wari at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious & Ethnic Diversity: "Inside-Out / Outside-In: Shifting Architectures of Refugee Inhabitation."

2 - The terms "refugee camp" or "the camp" here refer to historical places rather than abstract concepts, captured in the slides that accompanied this keynote address. This specificity attempts to value people's histories and lived experiences and name the violence that may be enacted by abstractions of these terms.

Thank you to the Max Planck Institute¹, the organisers of this workshop, whose nuanced and urgent call brought us all together, and Romola Sanyal, the keynote respondent, especially for her work on citizenship (Desai and Sanyal, 2012). Before I start, I would like to acknowledge relevant collaborations that have impacted my thinking (Bilsel and Maxim, forthcoming 2022; Chee, et. al., forthcoming; Chowdhury and Karim, 2018; Siddiqi and Lee, 2019, forthcoming 2020-21, forthcoming 2022), as well as insights gained from refugees and aid workers — on “decoloniality,” on “inside and outside,” on architecture, and on history. In the spirit of this workshop, I would like to raise several ideas, without necessarily attempting to cohere them. My hope is that this will be generative, rather than didactic. The invitation from the organisers arrived while I was teaching a course that attempted to disentangle architectural historical traditions from colonial practices. For example, my students and I worked through the contingent relationships between colonialism and humanitarianism. One of the premises of our discussion was that, if we take seriously the concerns and problematics of decolonising the mind, we might begin by looking for sources of knowledge in the refugee camp.² This thinking comes from Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Frantz Fanon, by way of Isnina Ali Rage, Chairlady of Ifo Camp, Dadaab (Thiong’o, 2009, 1986; Fanon, 1967, 1968).

Isnina Ali Rage is a Somali woman who lived in a refugee camp in Kenya, and represented that camp to foreign governments. I hope my photographic portrait conveys her strength. She didn’t require any country’s “emergency relief,” nor any aid agency’s “gender mainstreaming,” nor any “humanitarian care” – she was a refugee and also a sovereign person. She was a giver of refuge, in my opinion. I met with her while working in Dadaab for the Womens’ Refugee Commission, a research and advocacy unit whose parent organization is the International Rescue Committee. I interviewed her for a report on relationships between livelihoods and gender based violence on the day that I took this photograph.

Putting her into dialogue with Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Frantz Fanon requires an epistemic shift. I argue that the camp must perform that shift, through its own affect, not through the agency of any interpreter’s



Fig. 1 – Isnina Ali
Rage, *Chairlady*,
Ifo Camp, Dadaab,
Kenya, 2011. Photo
by author.

What if camps
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translation of it – for example, any scholar's empirical analysis of it. Camps have long been sites for empiricism: in their darkest forms, sites of detention and concentration, and, in lighter forms, as missions, or liberatory vehicles, for the rescued *and* the saviours. But what if camps didn't serve empiricist ends for knowledge production? What if they didn't provide the conceptual or material object for instrumental study? Instead, what if the inhabitation of the camp – to use our organisers' words – generated theory, practices, and ritual knowledge of its own? This epistemic shift is a decolonial method.

Decolonial theory and practice grew out of anti-colonial struggles, such as the negritude, Pan-Africanism, and Black consciousness movements. Decoloniality is a response to an ongoing condition of coloniality. Nelson Maldonado-Torres explains:

Decoloniality is not an approach to eliminate colonialism. It is to understand colonialism as a force that rationalizes, erases, and denigrates people.

Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such a nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 243; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015: 487).

Thinking on decoloniality begins with thinking on “the dark side of modernity” – that is, understanding modernity as intrinsically linked to the colonial (Mignolo, 2011). Decoloniality is not an approach to eliminate colonialism. It is to understand colonialism as a force that rationalizes, erases, and denigrates people – but as only one of many historical forces, no more important than non-colonial, non-violent histories and practices.

Decolonial theory is subversive. It is intended to be reparative, restorative, and liberatory. It seeks to reverse larger forms of colonial violence, which are ongoing. It aspires to acknowledge, validate, and elevate the life and work of formerly and presently colonised people, people of colour, Indigenous people. As Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni writes, decoloniality pushes to shift the “geography of reason from the West as the epistemic locale from which the ‘world is described, conceptualized and ranked’ to the ex-colonized epistemic sites as legitimate points of departure in describing the construction of the modern world order” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015: 485-496). To return to Ngugi, to decolonize the mind means to think outside the strictures of coloniality, to think outside of colonialism as an all-encompassing force.

If we follow this, a decolonial approach to architectural history might be to recognize its structural entanglements with the colonial, but not see these as systemic. One way to reverse the colonial, in turn, might be to think through the camp by thinking through

the university. Some concrete histories may be of use here, particularly of the “Decolonise the Curriculum” movement, which grew out of and was linked to the “Rhodes Must Fall” and “Fees Must Fall” movements. It began with an action on the 9th of March in 2015 (Fairbanks, 2015).

Chumani Maxwele, a student of political science on a scholarship at the University of Cape Town, travelled by *matatu* (minibus) to attend courses. People travelled for hours on these buses, often relieving themselves at roadside stops. At a stop on the way, Maxwele picked up a bucket of excrement by the roadside. Later that day, he hurled it at a bronze statue of the nineteenth-century British colonialist Cecil John Rhodes on the University campus. This action became known as the “poo protest.” Three days later, one-thousand-plus students gathered and demanded to remove the statue from campus. Within five weeks, there were hundreds of students amassing, tagging the statue with graffiti, covering it in black garbage bags, and singing anti-apartheid songs. They shut down the campus. The Vice-Chancellor sent the staff home, and the statue was removed. It led to other protests. At Rhodes University, students demanded an institutional name change. At Stellenbosch, students protested the use of the Afrikaans language. Some campuses shut down for weeks.

Maxwele was part of a generation of students known as the “born frees.” This generation is the first in South African history raised with almost no direct memory of apartheid.³ He came of age in a time of a falling South African currency, with tuition fees being raised by twenty percent. Amit Chaudhuri writes that the ambition of the “Rhodes Must Fall” movement lay beyond the removal of statues, and aimed “to bring out into the open institutional racism in university life in South Africa and Britain and to decolonise education” (Chaudhuri, 2016). The movement named unequal access to opportunity and mobility as a structural norm, and called for structural transformation. At issue was an ethos that gave space and pre-eminence to such a figure, but hesitated to interrogate Rhodes’ legacy. That legacy did not merely include Rhodes’ financial bequests and their educational offshoots, such as the Rhodes scholarship, but the vision embodied in his will which called for:

Within five weeks, there were hundreds of students amassing, tagging the statue with graffiti, covering it in black garbage bags, and singing anti-apartheid songs.

4 - "... of the entire Continent of Africa, the Holy Land, the Valley of the Euphrates, the Islands of Cyprus and Candia, the whole of South America, the Islands of the Pacific not heretofore possessed by Great Britain, the whole of the Malay Archipelago, the seaboard of China and Japan..." (Chaudhari, 2016).

These words should be interrogated in the present, because they undergirded an ideology that produced profound structural inequality through ongoing colonial practices.

...the establishment, promotion and development of a Secret Society, the true aim and object whereof shall be for the extension of British rule throughout the world, the perfecting of a system of emigration from the United Kingdom, and of colonisation by British subjects of all lands where the means of livelihood are attainable by energy, labour and enterprise and especially the occupation by British settlers⁴...

Then he names several lands. Surely, these incendiary words must have meant something different to Rhodes in his context than they do here? Moreover, would not a historical contextualization of these words have value, and counter their capacity to injure? For the movement, this was precisely beside the point. The movement demanded precisely that these words *should* be interrogated *in the present*, because they undergirded an ideology that produced profound structural inequality through ongoing colonial practices. Not colonialism in the abstract or in the past, but very specific colonialisms, at specific times, in specific places in the present.

There was a great deal of controversy over the attacks on the statues, on the physical property, on the icons. These statues came to represent authority so powerfully that they became ready, meaningful targets. They became the iconographic locus for protests. Their vandalism produced a forum. This forum is not meant in the sense raised in the *Forensis* project, which in important ways holds scientific rationality as a basis for analysis (Keenan, 2014; Weizman, 2014). This forum, instead, lies in the tradition of iconoclasm: a kind of aesthetic disruption, sometimes literally by vandalism.

This iconoclastic generation of a forum did not occur only through a material intervention, but through conceptual ones. It is important to note that the "Rhodes Must Fall," "Fees Must Fall," and "Decolonise the Curriculum" movements were connected to very particular power centres – Cape Town and Oxford – and circulation between these centres returned focus to certain thinkers. These thinkers had never lost their immediacy, but they suddenly became quite urgent again. Several programs started to take the exercise of curriculum revision quite seriously: for example, at Oxford and Cambridge, and perhaps particularly the School of Oriental and African Studies

(SOAS). SOAS played a special part in the colonial history of European higher education institutions, as specialising in the study of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The students' union articulated a new set of educational priorities: expansion of the curriculum, greater diversity and inclusion in enrollment and hiring, and the cessation of economic exploitation of campus workers. Ironically, these demands stood – *in theory* – in opposition to an aim of the school's establishment: to produce the figure of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, as bounded epistemological categories, and within that practice, to perform multiple forms of subjugation.

The “Decolonise the Curriculum” movement recalls protests on campuses worldwide in 1968, when many similar calls were made to change the purpose and tenor of the university. I started researching this when I began teaching students at Barnard College, Columbia University, where I often work in the library of Avery Hall.⁵ Avery Hall is the home of the architecture school, and came to play a significant role in the aftermath of the 1968 student occupation of the campus. Though the events of this campus occupation come from a different historical context, they suggest alternate intellectual traditions for the “Decolonise the Curriculum” movement.

In February 1967, members of a group called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) staged “sit-ins” to protest the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency’s workforce recruitment on campus, as well as the University’s involvement in the Institute for Defense Analysis, a think tank of the U.S. Department of Defense. As the year progressed, vocal opposition to U.S. imperialism in the Vietnam War increased. In 1967, University President Grayson Kirk issued a ban against any picketing or demonstrations inside all campus buildings. By March 1968, the SDS defied this policy. They staged a demonstration inside Low Library, an iconic library at the top of the steps on Columbia’s main campus. A few years earlier, in 1959, plans had been initiated to build a gymnasium for Columbia College, the core liberal arts undergraduate unit at Columbia University. The gym was intended to sit on two acres of public land inside Morningside Park, a park just adjacent to Columbia University, in Harlem. The New York legislature approved the plans, which included community

5 - Slide of Avery Hall picketers during the strike following arrests of students on campus shown in my course, “Architectural Histories of Colonialism and Humanitarianism,” Barnard College, Columbia University, Fall 2018. Photo: Columbia College Today, Spring 1968 (Columbia University 1968, 1998; Wilk, 2018; Sutton, 2017).

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A rally held on campus led to a violent march on the gymnasium site. Students started ripping down the construction fences.

access, albeit limited. However, opponents of the gym were critical of its design. Columbia is in Morningside Heights, and sits on a steep cliff separating it from Morningside Park, down below, in Harlem. The cross-section of the gym was intended to bridge that steep divide. The Harlem community was eventually allotted only the basement space. The state of the art gym was at the top level, reserved for the Columbia students alone. The Society of Afro-American students (founded in the mid 1960s) vocalized opposition to Columbia University's land use practices, real estate negotiations, and treatment of its neighbours, which crystallized in the spatial planning of this gym. This tension reached a crisis in April of 1968. A rally held on campus led to a violent march on the gymnasium site. Students started ripping down the construction fences. They staged a sit-in inside one of the major halls on campus. They formulated demands that the administration stop construction on the gym, sever all ties with the Institute for Defense Analysis, and that President Kirk and the trustees resign their positions. They made serious demands of the University leadership, six in total, and staged sit-ins in some of the major halls on the campus. At first, the black students and white students protested together. After some time, the Hamilton Hall protest desegregated. There are many stories about why this happened. The white students were evicted from Hamilton Hall, and the different elements of the student body began to take up different but equally radical causes. Some of the students focused on Columbia's relations with and impacts on its neighbouring community. Some focused on what kind of knowledge the University produced, and for whom. The students eventually occupied Low Library and the President's office. The administration summoned the New York City police, and 712 students were arrested. The students had formed a Strike Coordinating Committee to call for a student-faculty strike, in an attempt to mobilize the full population on campus. The ensuing strike lasted through the end of the school term, shutting down the campus. The strikers also disrupted graduation. They marched out of the formal commencement proceedings, and held a counter-commencement outdoors. They formed what they called a Liberation School. Its counter-classes suggested that university instruction should be about real things. In other words, they called for a decolonised curriculum.

Please note how architecture, spatial history, and broader sorts of engagements with the built environment have come into play in this reformulation of the university. The architecture school itself went on strike after these events and it radically experimented with a form of reparations. It admitted and provided free education to a cohort of African-American students. Sharon Sutton has recently documented this in a book that compiles a set of oral histories with that cohort. I raise all this together by way of pointing to moments of imagination in the university. Not only is a different university being imagined, but the entire premise of the university is being questioned.

Another reason I focus on Columbia University is that its spatial history is tied to its colonial history. The embedded links between traditions and architectures of higher education, colonialism, and humanitarianism suggest relationships between the epistemic order of the university and that of the camp. Columbia University embodies a contradictory entanglement of liberal and oppressive traditions, particular to the history of the United States. It was founded by Royal Charter in 1754 as Kings College, and is the oldest institution of higher learning in New York, the fifth oldest in United States. Its classes were suspended during another revolutionary period – the American Revolution – in 1776. The College reopened in 1784, eliminating the name Kings College, and opting for the new name Columbia, an expression of New World patriotism, but one which normalized the contradictory colonial hegemonies embedded in United State history.

Along these lines, it is important to note other contradictions. In 1784, the first professor of Oriental languages was appointed at Columbia University. That was the same year that the Asiatic Society was founded in Calcutta, the Indian headquarters for British East India Company, which would later become capital of the British Raj. While the direct relationship between architecture's epistemic traditions and the colonial Orientalist tradition has been well documented (Borden and Rendell, 2000; Çelik, 1996; Crinson, 1996, on James Ferguson), it is also important to note connections between the liberal university and humanitarian discourses and architectures, which tie together colonial and liberal thought and action. Thinking from New York about this contradictory

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With such an articulation of contradiction in liberal thought and action, how can a historical tradition linked so intimately to the colonial be understood?

alignment, we might look to the founding students and trustees of Kings College and later Columbia University. One of these people was John Jay, who became the first Chief Justice of the United States. His grandson, also named John Jay, was a lawyer and a diplomat, who, in 1834, was manager of the New York Young Men's Anti-Slavery Society, and, in 1847, the Secretary of the Irish Relief Commission during what became known as the Potato Famine. He authored abolitionist papers. He was also the President of the American Historical Society and helped to found the Metropolitan Museum of Art, institutions with an inclusive reform mission toward the people of New York. He remained an active member of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Academy of Design. Within three generations of this family, a thread appeared between colonial practice and philanthropic humanitarian practice.

With such an articulation of contradiction in liberal thought and action, how can a historical tradition linked so intimately to the colonial be understood? These problems were raised at Columbia during the events of 1968 and, later, as part of the recent "Decolonise the Curriculum" movement. Through those histories, in spite of the foreclosure of radical thought that followed, we can follow the imagination in experiments that attempted to reverse the university politically and epistemically. The structures, people, values, currents, all which generated knowledge and expertise, were replaced with others—even if only momentarily. Can we imagine the same for the camp? This is the question I want to raise in this workshop. To return to its concerns, and to Isnina Ali Rage and the questions raised by her subject position, I would put forward that the camp has a role to play in an epistemic shift. It does so in three major ways. First, the camp provides aesthetically and historically precise forms for analysis, architectures of real and lived places. This architecture has not been constructed as a symbol, and is not an abstraction. The camp offers a view into the social life of an architecture that is an aggregation of modern materials and designed space. This architecture offers the empirical texture for a process of very close looking and, through this process, the exposure of unexpected histories.

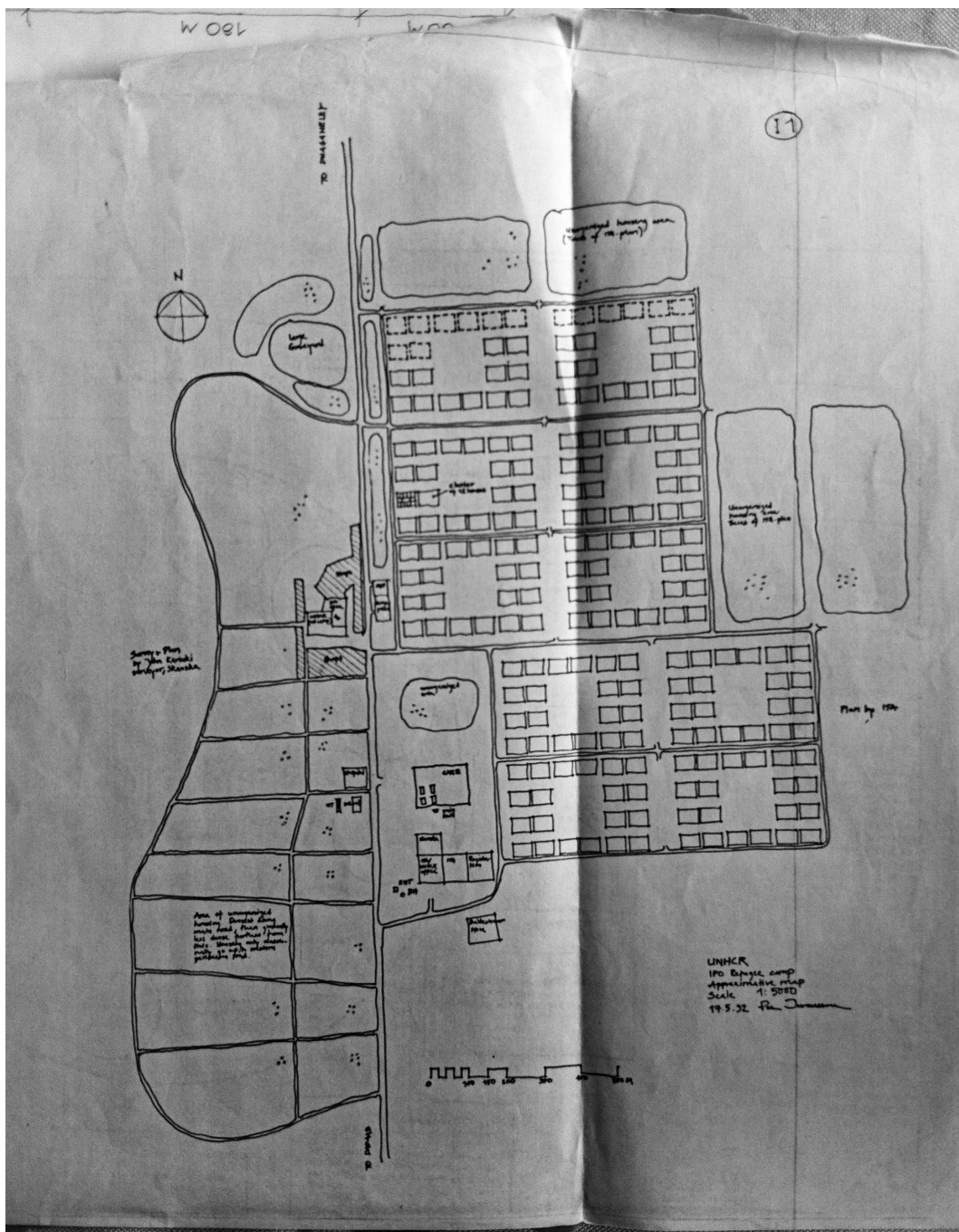


Fig. 2 – Ifo Camp,
Dadaab, Kenya, 1992.
Plan drawing by Per
Iwansson. Image
courtesy of Per
Iwansson.

Fig. 3 – Ifo Camp.
Dadaab, Kenya, 1992.
Photo by Per Iwansson. Image courtesy
of Per Iwansson.



Construction of such knowledge might have been the work of experts and thinkers outside conventionally understood epistemic frameworks.

Second, the camp helps us refine methods of studying architectural histories, through its normalization of a variety of documentary archives. The archive of visual material on Dadaab includes many artifacts of militaristic surveillance of refugees, both the rational universal perspective of overview maps and satellite photographs, and the ground views of ethnographers. But there are also many other perspectives and kinds of images. For example, an architect hand-sketched this plan and took this photograph when he visited Dadaab in 1992, just after Ifo camp was established in 1991, and these images remain among the first visual representations of any of the settlements. The analytical work of abstraction rendered in this plan suggests something architectural can generate a different kind of knowledge of the past, a response to the affective. This hand sketch based upon sensitivities and experiential learning on the ground expands the sensibilities to be probed within the official archive.

Third, the materials and media of the camp inform the construction of fields of theory, databases of institutional knowledge, and new knowledge institutions. For example, there is the institutionalization of humanitarian knowledge. Nongovernmental organizations establish a radically different archive than that of colonial or state authorities. For another example, there is artistic or aesthetic knowledge. Curation and exhibition are important archiving practices. Another example is that of knowledge institutions related to political-economic development, whether private or

state-based. The advocacy-oriented field of refugee studies grew in part out of a response to the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya.

From these examples, we might induce that the construction of such knowledge might have been the work of experts and thinkers outside conventionally understood epistemic frameworks. Isnina Ali Rage, for example, was among many refugees who engaged deeply with humanitarians, with institutions, and the state, regardless of any asymmetries in power that may have stemmed from the circumstances of physical or political displacement (Siddiqi, 2018, 2020, forthcoming 2021). In her case, something originating in the refugee camps *as an architecture* effected a political subjectivity, which is a different way of thinking than the usual understanding of the political sphere producing built form.

Thinking this way returns us to the decolonial. Decolonial thinking means that producing knowledge and living it are not separate. Thus, decolonial thought applies itself to the past as well as the present and makes visible both a history and its connection to the telling of a history. It illuminates the links between knowledge, social practices and social action—between architecture, architectural history, and spatial practice.

I think the labor of this workshop can be understood in this vein. In the spirit of the workshop, I have put many things on the table, and tried to complicate and churn things rather than neatly resolve them. As we work on reversing the university, on the one hand, and the camp, on the other, I leave you with a question. Can we imagine this architecture?

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